DOCUMENT RESUME

ED 455 569 EA 031 096

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TITLE	On Reflective Practitioner Research in Czech Education.
PUB DATE	2000-09-00
NOTE	10p.; Paper presented the Annual International Practitioner Research Conference (3rd, Innsbruck, Austria, September 26-28, 2000).
PUB TYPE	Speeches/Meeting Papers (150)
EDRS PRICE	MF01/PC01 Plus Postage.
DESCRIPTORS	Educational Change; *Educational Improvement; Elementary Secondary Education; Foreign Countries; Governance; Public Schools; *Research Design; Research Projects; Research Utilization; *School Effectiveness; *School Restructuring; *Teacher Education; *Teacher Effectiveness; Teacher Improvement
IDENTIFIERS	Czech Republic

ABSTRACT

This paper reports on a study of reflective practice, which has been a gradual process in education in the Czech Republic. Until the 1990s, most research and development in education and in preservice and inservice teacher education and training had been different from this reflective approach. Instead, quantitative research approaches had been conducted exclusively by professional researchers from outside the school. Teaching was regarded as a job of an executive nature, and the main headteacher's function was to control its execution by teachers. Critical inquires were not wanted. Both preservice and inservice teacher education were quite removed from efforts to make reflective activities an important part of learning and development. Although schools got a large deal of autonomy in the 1990s, inservice teacher education and training did not help them much to learn and use their independence. The last decade has brought many significant changes, and some of them have created opportunities for the recognition of reflective practitioner research. However, many of these fundamental changes were carried out predominantly to remove existing barriers and to make some link to the precommunist era, rather than to take into account current developments in the West. The pre-1989 system was abandoned, but there was no systematic replacement for the old system. In spite of many efforts, there is an urgent necessity to encourage reflective practice in almost every field of education. (DFR)

ED 455 569

ON REFLECTIVE PRACTITIONER RESEARCH IN CZECH EDUCATION

(contribution to a panel discussion at the 3rd International Practitioner Research Conference, Innsbruck, September 2000)

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ON REFLECTIVE PRACTITIONER RESEARCH IN CZECH EDUCATION
(contribution to a panel discussion at the 3rd International Practitioner Research Conference, Innsbruck, September 2000)

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The recognition of reflective practice has been a gradual process in education in the Czech Republic. Until the 1990s, most research and development in education and of pre- and in- service teacher education and training had been different from this approach. Instead, quantitative research approaches, conducted almost exclusively by professional researchers from outside the school, played the dominant role. Teaching was understood as a job of executive nature, and the main headteacher's function was to control its execution by teachers. Critical inquiries were not wanted.

The last decade brought many significant changes, and some of them have influenced positively the chances for the recognition of reflective practitioner research. However, many of these fundamental changes were carried out predominantly in order to remove the existing barriers and to make some link to the pre-communist era, rather than to take into account current developments in the West. Nevertheless, schools and their own initiatives started being regarded as a basis for development, although they were not getting much support from outside. Qualitative research got some recognition but is still playing a minor role. And — in spite of the gradually changing climate and a number of impressive grassroot initiatives, clearly stressing the key role of reflective practitioner research — the idea of teachers researching in their own schools and developing schools from within was not easily accepted and realized. One can see what a slow and complicated process it is to recognize schools and those involved in them as possible researchers, and how unusual it is to support their efforts to change the practice when employing such a research. Not only new skills are needed. It is not

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easy to motivate teachers for such an involvement under current material (especially financial) circumstances.

Until now, the reflective practice has mostly been introduced **in education** as an instrument of materializing one's own behaviour; as the way of understanding unconscious contents of one's own mind, i.e. the unconscious incentives; as thinking back about oneself, about one's actions, ideas, opinions, attitudes; as one of the main pedagogical competencies; as an inner dialogue the teacher (student teacher) leads with him or herself, taking critical distance from his or her own experience and trying to compare, evaluate, or correct it. In Czech education there has been much less understanding (if any) of reflection as a precondition of solving pedagogical situations; as a precondition or even part of the teacher's professional development; or as a creative ability of the teacher.

As indicated, the daily practice of **teacher education**, in both pre-service and in-service phases, was usually quite far from steady efforts to make reflective activities an important part of learning and development. In *pre-service teacher education*, the long-lasting uniformity was replaced by a variety of programmes: virtually all teacher educating institutions started to realize their own teacher education programmes in the early 1990s. These programmes often varied in the number and extent of pedagogical and psychological courses, in the relation of these courses to the rest of the pre-service programme, in the proportion of theoretical courses and practical periods, and in alike characteristics. Many programmes suffered from a lack of profound work with student teachers. There were too large groups, rather short courses, mass forms of lecturing, and sometimes no readiness of the teaching staff to make a significant change. Only seldom some promising institutionalized forms were set up, such as the "clinical term", field schools providing student teachers with more systematic practical efforts, group work, etc. The latter, though, seemed to have the

potential to install reflective practice more firmly into pre-service teacher education, and sometimes the materialization thereof could be seen.

Although schools got a large deal of autonomy in the 1990s, *in-service teacher education and training* did not help them much to learn and use their independence. The pre-1989 system was abandoned, as it was viewed by most teachers as indoctrination from above. There was no systematic replacement for the old system, even though the improvement of the performance of schools and teachers started being understood as a matter of their own initiatives. Major responsibilities were given to headteachers, yet their readiness for newly designed jobs differed largely. They became responsible for virtually all aspects of school functioning (economy, education, personnel, etc.).

School governance has not been fully developed well yet. Sufficient external support to schools is still lacking. Consequently, alike problems can be seen in in-service teacher education and training.

It seems that the chances of reflective practitioner research were greatly reduced by the poor national and regional education policies in the 1990s. Generally, these policies did not create any motivating environment for teachers to acquire new skills and use them for critical and developmental inquiries in schools. The whole decade is viewed by many as the period of underestimating the needs of change process management on many different levels and in a number of respects. So, the system of in-service teacher education and training is not complete and the rules of its functioning are still missing. Instead of a firm and dynamic system, there is a fragmented and rather monotonous offer for teacher-volunteers who are still interested (although they will not have any formal profit) and who are permitted to take part by their headteachers. The situation is alarming in view of the deprivation of the profession of a teacher, having lasted for decades. How can we think, then, that school development will arise

from the ability of the school to examine its own work and to develop its own school-based forms of adult learning?

Let us divide the main features of the situation in the 1990s into positive and negative ones. Among the **positive features**, two major developments can be seen:

- During the 1990s, grassroot initiatives (networks) played a very important part in in-service education and training of school leaders and teachers. They often focused on activities stressing reflective practitioner research as a precondition of meaningful learning and development. At the moment, some of them are well organized, even on the nation-wide scale, and trying (with certain success) to get more say in the process of the educational reform. Yet, their links to the centre and to the newly established regional authorities do not always seem to be firm enough.
- Concepts of internal school evaluation and self-evaluation have gradually been introduced. Although a lot remains to be done in this respect, some positive potential for the recognition of reflective practitioner research and its links to school development can be traced.

Among the **negative** or, at least, **challenging features**, the following can be identified:

- In-service teacher education and training is not linked to career development and school development. In spite of what had been officially promised, and of foreign recommendations (e.g. from OECD), there is no formal connection between in-service education and training and school development. The *Učitel* programme

(*Teacher*), announced in 1996 and meant to be the starting point hereof, has not been implemented yet.

- Due to the strong influence of outer forces on schools (political, economic, demographic etc.), there is a narrowed view of what should be the priority in schools. During the whole decade, economic and legislative issues were dominant for school leaders, while subject-related (methodical) issues played the most important role for teachers. On the other hand, little attention was paid to working with people. Schools in general have very limited funds for in-service activities. Under the pressure of the "new situation" they choose to spend most of it as indicated above. Obviously, it makes the task of internal change of the school very hard, while the support to reflective practitioner research is considered secondary.
- People is schools sometimes show a tendency to compensate for the above choices, going for "human issues" in in-service education and training. Nonetheless, they then turn to the "most attractive" topics, such as e.g. non-verbal communication, transactional analysis, etc. Specific "recipes" are demanded too... Even many state-run in-service education and training institutions keep offering these "attractions". Focus on school people as agents of change — i.e. on their systematic preparation for independent research and development activities — is hardly visible. Generally, an appropriate mechanism of the offer is still missing.
- The above mentioned is connected to the dominant design of in-service teacher education and training: there is a tendency to prefer short-time, or even one-off programmes with rather traditional patterns. Numerous surveys have shown that many people working in schools prefer a "lecture-type" in-service programme, which is safe for them, requiring almost no active involvement but providing most "tangible material" (information). Skill training seems to be still rather unpopular,

and the same applies for systematic reflections and change efforts, linked to the school itself and to participating teachers. (Our experience shows, however, that once people get involved in closer activities to the social-emotional level of communication and can speak about their own school and work, they find it meaningful.)

- Not surprisingly, school development programmes designed at least partly as school-based ones are scarce. Education and training offered to individuals from every school and taking place outside provides hardly any chance for developing schools as "learning entities". School-based activities (incl. research), in which the school staff would more largely participate, should be focused on. Hardly any consulting is available.
- It seems that the external environment is not ready for significant changes either. Higher education institutions are usually not involved in backing-up the reflective practitioner research in schools, neither in supporting the development of an individual or a school. There is some involvement in in-service education and training from academics, materialized on an individual basis, though: they are sometimes hired to act as trainers (yet seldom they act as lecturers rather than trainers).
- Doubts should not be ignored about adequate qualification of trainers for newly designed in-service education, training and development programmes. Problems in this area might deepen the gap between "academics" and "practitioners", supporting so the "close-down" gestures of school people towards reflective approaches.
- Until now, very little attention has been paid to education and training of prospective school leaders. Currently operating school leaders are in a rather

difficult situation. Yet, those who would like to prepare themselves for such positions in school management are much more so. Their possibility to get involved in any training depends almost exclusively on the headteachers' willingness to let them do it. This does not support the future development of the reflective practice, either.

What does the future look like?

In spite of the efforts of numerous people from schools and their environment, one can see the urgent necessity to encourage the reflective practice in almost every field of education. Though, it will probably take some time for such a need to be satisfied — at least to some extent.

The latest draft of the "White book of Czech education" (autumn 2000) points out that "the basis [for the change from within the school] is the voluntary initiative of the school. At the same time, schools need systematic and purposeful support and clear guidance from the centre." (Národní, 2000:42). Among other things, this document recommends a system of tools to boost school autonomy, to launch the Programme of school development, and to build up the supporting infrastructure for schools and teachers. It urges to increase the quality of teacher education and training, to enhance the system of in-service teacher education and training, to set up career and salary ladders, and to increase teachers' salaries. All these and many more recommendations quite clearly indicate the need of recognition for the fundamental role of initiative people in schools and for their motivated, critical, and reflective activity. Such a recognition would be a benefit for their schools and for themselves.

This may also be a chance for the reflective practitioner research in the Czech Republic.

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